



CITY OF HOUSTON

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TO: Parking Subcommittee

FROM: Robert M. Litke, Director

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SUBJECT: Parking Issue Paper

The following commentary is intended to help focus and facilitate discussion within the committee.

Parking is an issue that cuts across many aspects of the planning commission committee structure. In an auto dominated region knitted together by freeways and major thoroughfares there are few convenient opportunities for people to go from place to place by walking or by public transportation (with the notable exception of the Main Street light rail line). Since the auto is the dominant means of choice (whether by default or not), at each destination point in a trip, there must be a place to park--on street or off-street, on grade or in a garage.

Minimum off street parking requirements for single family development were set out in chapter 42—two spaces for each dwelling unit—in 1982. It was not until 1989 that the city established specific off-street parking requirements in chapter 26 for a wide range of other uses. Since that time a few changes have been made in city requirements, but they have been relatively minor.

There has been no overall review of the ordinance since its inception 16 years ago and no apparent demand for such a review. But does lack of demand imply that all is well or is it simply a function of complaisance? The old adage “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it” doesn’t necessarily apply. In some respects it might be broken and in others not.

There are provisions in the ordinance for variances to the parking requirements. Over the past 16 years, there have been billions of dollars in new development in Houston and but a handful of parking variance requests. Is that because the ordinance requirements are near perfect or is it that the market requirements exceed city minimums so there is no issue? If response is solely to the market, is there a hidden and long term public cost which the taxpayer may not want to pay or should not pay? There is an obvious relationship of parking, economic development, and traffic mobility. Too much economic development with too much parking can overtax the capacity of a street system, producing gridlock and potential economic stagnation. We must review and look ahead.

City council made findings in 1989 concluding that the central business district could be exempted from all parking requirements. Council also established parking management areas for the Texas Medical Center/South Main, Uptown/Galleria and Greenway/Summit major activity centers. These PMAs have parking ratio requirements that differ from general city requirements and overall management programs to ensure compliance. A lot a development has occurred in these areas since 1989 and just two years ago the Planning Commission required TMC to update its parking management program. It may be timely for a review of the parking situation in the other two PMAs.

The Texas Medical Center is the second largest employment area after the CBD. Continued growth is desired and expected, but the traffic carrying capacity of some streets in the area is already strained. Adding street capacity (more lanes) in a built up area may not be not be feasible yet the parking ordinance mandates parking for new development. We need to look at this issue which is particularly relevant to the TMC area. The TMC, of course, is directly served by light rail. With significantly improved transit access, are mandated parking requirements overkill? It may be time to consider some mechanism that will balance mandated parking requirements with consideration of parking impacts in an area or on a case basis.

The Midtown area is still offers prime real estate development opportunities with considerable potential for high density development along and on nearby streets accessible to the rail line on Main. Should we offer, if not require, a reduced parking requirement, at least for multi family development based on distance from light rail?

In many of our neighborhoods, particularly inside the loop, changes are taking place as older properties are redeveloped at higher densities. Our parking requirement dictate parking spaces per dwelling unit based on bedroom count, but there are no provisions for guest parking. As density increases and curb spaces are taken up, what will happen? The competition for street space is heating up and in many areas the amount of curb-side parking is diminishing. Higher density inner city development creates a need for more guest parking accommodations in new residential development but we have no such requirements. Redevelopment and in-fill development increases the demand for new retail/commercial services. Many long term neighborhood businesses do not have sufficient on site parking. The result, in many areas is an increase in the need and competition for on-street parking.

In 2001, city council adopted an ordinance enabling the creation of special parking permit areas designed to eliminate the competition for on street parking on residential streets between residents and non-residential parkers (from nearby businesses or even commuters). This permit parking program (chapter 45 of the city code) has been beneficial in many neighborhoods but in some it is exacerbating the problems of competition for space. As originally designed, the program did not take into account neighborhood business issues. Should it be redesigned? Is there a need to re-examine neighborhood business parking requirements? Can local parking facilities help to solve the problems faced by individual businesses?

Should we leave it to the market to resolve, as it will over time, or do we consider the impacts on a neighborhood and consider mandating some guest parking on a percentage basis, or other options?

RML/tg

attachments: Parking Ordinance
Decal Parking Ordinance
Decal Parking Areas Map